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PP RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR  
DE RUEHKU #1034/01 3020858  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 290858Z OCT 09  
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4124  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 2051  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 001034

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NEA/ARP, NEA/RA, EEB, EMBASSY AMMAN FOR ESTH HUB OFFICER,  
EPA FOR INTERNATIONAL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/21/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [SENV](#) [PINR](#) [KU](#)  
SUBJECT: UNCLOGGING KUWAIT'S DRAINS

REF: A. KUWAIT 876  
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 244  
[1](#)C. KUWAIT 948

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and  
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Affluent vs. Effluent  
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[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On August 24, some 180,000 cubic meters of wastewater leaked into the streets and storm sewers of the affluent Kuwaiti neighborhood of Mishref before making its way into the Gulf, where it created an ongoing pollution problem that fouled miles of Kuwait's shoreline and persists to this day. The relatively new Mishref wastewater recycling facility -- completed in 2006 at a cost of \$160 million -- had been plagued with operational issues; ten of its 14 pumps had lain inoperable for months (ref A) due to poor maintenance -- despite innumerable warnings that trouble was brewing. Moving ahead with repair and cleanup is expected to take months and will involve enormous costs. The odor of raw sewage and the damage to Kuwait's offshore waters and shoreline have prompted widespread introspection and sclerotic attempts by Kuwait's citizenry to affix blame for the disaster, with much of the anger directed at the perceived failure of the government and the ruling Al Sabah family to provide adequate public services to the nation. While the GOK has taken some steps to repair the problem, including calling in the U.S. Corp of Engineers as consultants, many Kuwaitis view this failure of basic infrastructure as a metaphor for the GOK's inability to deal effectively with a range of crises. Much less focused than the effort to assign blame has been the Kuwaiti public's effort to orchestrate an effective campaign to demand accountability and a resolution to the problem. Two months after the initial disaster, effluent continues to bleed into the Gulf and a bad smell lingers (both physically and figuratively). Parliament re-convened on October 27 and will certainly examine the issue, but more with an eye to grilling those perceived responsible than to finding an effective solution. Having aired their complaints in Kuwait's media and in the country's many diwaniyyas, most Kuwaitis feel they've done their job; the rest is now up to the government, but many Kuwaitis have little faith that the government is up to the task. End Summary.

Fix the Blame, not the Problem  
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[1](#)2. (C) The Mishref sewage disaster provides a glimpse into the challenges facing civil society in Kuwait. In this case as in many others, critics responding to the disaster took their complaints to the diwaniyyas and the press, but the effort ended there -- there were no Kuwaiti town hall meetings, no petitions by concerned citizens, no organized

lobbying efforts to try to compel the government to address the problem more quickly and effectively. The Mishref case followed a familiar pattern -- angry and urgent calls by Parliamentarians for the removal of the relevant minister or other blame-worthy officials (those who approved the design, the contract, the maintenance contractor, etc.) immediately overshadowed any real discussion on how best to resolve the environmental disaster or prevent similar problems from recurring. (Note: A U.S. Corps of Engineers officer told Embassy on October 28 that the GOK took 26 days just to plug an overflowing manhole. The officer noted that efforts to repair the fundamental problems remain in the early stages, partly due to Parliament having effectively blocked repair efforts while it attempted to sort out blame. End Note.)

13. (C) As Zuhair Al-Mahmeed, a prominent moderate Shia political and social activist (Secretary General of the Islamic National Consensus Movement) recently told Polchief, Kuwaitis have adopted a "passive" attitude towards social problems and are accustomed to relying on government fixes. In addition, Al-Mahmeed commented, they have a "low level of environmental consciousness" that renders them surprisingly accepting of Mishref-type disasters. In Al-Mahmeed's view, however, (a view echoed by many Kuwaitis) the fundamental problem is pervasive corruption that allows contracts to be improperly awarded with little follow-up or oversight. In a small society like Kuwait, he suggested, citizens are woven together by ties of kinship and obligation and the guilty parties in a corruption issue are often one's friends, neighbors, or relatives. Kuwaitis are content to see a few high-ranking figures take the fall for a disaster, but few of them want to peer too closely into the deals their friends

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and associates have cooked (judge not lest ye be judged, perhaps) and few are prepared to revamp the system that allows such disasters.

14. (C) This public passivity extends even to the business class, including those directly impacted by the incident. With the smell still lingering, hoteliers and business proprietors most affected by the spill -- those located along the shoreline -- have told Embassy they hesitate to press the government for a quick clean-up for fear that, if deemed too strident in their complaints, they risk being cut out of future contracts or financial deals dependent on government largesse. Having vented their frustration, Kuwaitis are adhering to tradition and waiting for the government -- the traditional source of largesse -- to fix the problem. Many Kuwaitis, however, are not optimistic that the government has the capacity to fix things in a lasting way. As Ahmed Al-Sarraf, a prominent columnist -- and notoriously outspoken critic of the government -- recently told Polchief, "there are hundreds of Mishrefs" that occur all the time; what distinguishes the present crisis is the unavoidably public nature of the effluent spill. In Al-Sarraf's view, the fundamental problem is the GOK's lack of accountability ("only a few bureaucrats will be asked to temporarily step down or a contractor's license will be frozen for a little while"); the problem ultimately stems from the ruling family's unfitness to rule; few of the Al Sabah, Al-Sarraf commented, have the intellectual depth to grasp complicated issues or provide a vision for the future and many of them are involved in corruption; the aged Amir himself is looking backward rather than forward. In the opinion of Al-Sarraf -- and others in his circle of government critics -- Mishref shows that the Al Sabahs still view Kuwait as "their" country, despite their inability to solve its concrete problems, and do not want to comprehend that it's time for Kuwaitis to rule themselves.

Crisis Highlights Rivalries  
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15. (C) Sitting above the mess in their comfortable homes, many well-off liberals and conservatives alike tend to

distort the Mishref accident's significance through their own political prisms. Perceiving the issue as yet another stick with which to beat the GOK, Islamist Political Science professor Dr. Ibrahim Al-Hadban recently told poloff that Kuwaitis are content with the nation's leadership provided that the state's social welfare continues to "keep us fat and spoiled." However, he noted, the terms of the social contract with the Al Sabah (a ruling vice royal family) are "called into question" with each political or societal calamity. Almost nonchalant over the financial and environmental impact of the Mishref spill, many of the Kuwaiti moderates/liberals (Sunni and Shi'a alike -- those from "inside the wall" - ref B) see the encroachment of Islamism -- and those who promote it -- as the real effluent creating the stench in Kuwait: Amiri Diwan advisor Bader Al-Baijan told poloff October 18 -- in the context of discussing the Mishref spill -- that "these Islamists weren't even citizens 20 years ago, now they're running the country, deciding our dress and how we greet each other (referring to a perceived imposition of Islamic greetings)." In the same conversation, former Health Minister Abdul Al-Taweel, from his home in Mishref agreed that Islamists were wreaking havoc in Kuwait, and blamed an overzealous Islamist temperance movement as the reason for the spread of drugs in the country.

Comment: Kuwaiti Passivity Prohibits Development  
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16. (C) The GOK's traditional fundamental relationship with Kuwait's citizenry is one of patronage; the government dispenses and the people receive. That tradition remains deeply embedded in the Kuwaiti social and political fabric. Rank and file Kuwaitis accept the leadership role of the Al Sabah and its control of the government. With Kuwaitis paying no taxes, they have little stake in or sense of ownership of government -- despite the fact that it employs more than 90 percent of the citizen population. Accountability takes a back-seat to patronage -- and it is fear of losing patronage that partially explains why so many Kuwaitis are comfortable venting in diwaniyyas and the press, but go no further. Those that do try to advance a more activist agenda with the government, such as the recently created (and self-appointed) "Group of 26" senior advisors (see septel) risk being attacked for taking on airs.

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17. (C) As the Mishref incident has demonstrated, Kuwaitis are prepared to appeal for services (and grumble loudly when those services are not delivered) but lack an interest or capacity to organize effectively (outside of traditional family or tribal structures) and lobby for the changes they seek (a challenge also clearly demonstrated in our efforts to build solid MEPI programs here). Contrary to Al-Sarraf's hyperbolic assertions, there have not been "thousands" of calamities on the scale of Mishref, which has enabled the passivity of a coddled Kuwaiti public, and allowed their civic and political institutions to lag behind the country's relative wealth and material comfort. It remains to be seen whether this episode will prove a "wake up call" or merely another point of contention between a growing tribal class eager to feed equally at the generous public trough and a far more sophisticated (and relatively miniscule) urban merchant and political class nonetheless spoiled but perhaps more prepared to take genuine corrective measures (such as instilling the unfamiliar and largely unwelcome concept of "maintenance" vice "replacement" whether vis-a-vis institutions or things) in this most consumerist of societies. End comment.

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